

CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000 (AAP), child sexual abuse is “any sexual act with a child performed by an adult or an older child. This might be fondling the child's genitals; getting the child to fondle an adult's genitals; mouth to genital contact; rubbing an adult's genitals on the child; or actually penetrating the child's vagina or anus. Other forms of abuse can also occur that are not as easy to detect. These include showing an adult's genitals to a child, showing the child pornographic or “dirty” pictures or videotapes, or using the child as a model to make pornographic materials.” Unfortunately it is more common that people realize with AAP reporting 1 out of 5 adult women and 1 out of adult men reporting being sexually abuse as a child. While many go unreported, parents must understand the importance of treatment so a child who was abuse is least affected so they can grow normally as a child into adulthood.

What are the signs that your child has been sexually abused?

In the short term immediately following sexual abuse, the effects can vary. Some children report little or no psychological programs from the abuse, but these children may be afraid to express their emotions or may be denying their feelings as a way of coping to reduce the negative feelings of the abuse. The short-term effects of sexual abuse occur up to two year of the abuse, depending on the child's developmental stage but can include reverting back to thumb-sucking/bed wetting, sleep disturbances, eating problems, behavior and performance problems in school and withdrawal from social activities with friends. Depression, fear, sexual dysfunction, anxiety, guilt, withdrawal, acting out sexually can occur depending on the child's age. Depending on the severity of the abuse, the child may develop anxiety or fear of the opposite sex or display inappropriate sexual behavior, abnormal sexual interest or avoidance, sexually acting out. Without treatment, negate effects of child sexual abuse can become more apparent for years into adulthood, ranging from problems in adult relationships, sexual dysfunction, to additive disorders, and predisposing the victim to further re-victimization later in adulthood.

What to do when you find out that your child has been sexually abused?

Learning that your child may have been sexually abused can be overwhelming, but as a parent this is the time they need you most. It is important to not panic or overreact and remember to keep focus on your child's need to help and support them.

What to do immediately:

- Find a private place to talk. Reassure the child that you are happy they told you and that they did the right thing by telling you.
- Calmly ask the child to tell you what happened in their own words. Tell them it is OK to talk slowly and remember to not pressure the child to talk.
- Let the child know that you believe them
- Let the child know that you are sorry about what happened to them. As a parent it is common to have strong feelings of emotions and anger, but remember at this time your child needs you, so try to keep your own feelings and emotion separate from those of your child. Avoid angry threats about what you think should happen to the perpetrator. If you become angry and express strong emotions your child may become mixed up about how they feel toward the abuser, feel they are the reason you are upset and angry, and may even become scared by your reaction and not want to tell you more or if more abuse continues.

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- Reassure to your child that it was not their fault. Children can feel they have done something wrong or have now caused problems in the family by telling. Make sure that the child understands that the fault or problem is within the perpetrator. For example, "it is Mr. Smith's fault. He has a problem and needs help"
- Let your child know that you will do your best to protect them from further abuse. Remember that the child has already been betrayed by an adult or older child, so try not to make promises or threats at this point.
- If your child has a physical injury you should take them to your local emergency room immediately.
- As a parent/adult, alert **Child Protective Services 1-800-540-4000** or your local law enforcement agency. They will assist you further.

Helping your child further after the abuse?

- Continue believing your child and give them emotional support
- Be consistent in your care and follow regular routines about your home and in your life as much as possible (rules, chores, bedtime, meals, etc.)
- When your child has questions, take time and respond to your child's feelings and expressions about the abuse in a calm manner. Be supportive when your child needs to talk. Do not pressure your child to talk.
- Respect your child's privacy by not telling other people who do not need to know what happened.
- Remember to not ignore the incident, because they child will not forget even if not talked about. Consider professional counseling for the child (and perhaps for you as well to talk). Talking about the experience is therapeutic for your child as it is for adults. It can help your child better express their feelings of anger, fear, shame, guilt, confusion, or embarrassment of what happened. Therapy groups for children are available and can assist them in working through their feelings and better help them understand what happened was not their fault, that they are not alone, and are still believed and loved.
- Be supportive for yourself as well with someone you trust, a friend or spouse, but remember it will be also helpful to talk with a professional counselor as well. Support therapy are available for parents of sexually abused children to help them explode and express how they feel and their concerns.
- Remember that recovery comes with time along with acknowledgment, expressing feelings, and getting support

What help is available in Los Angeles County?

- If an emergency or life threatening, call 9-1-1
- For a non-emergency situation, call the **Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-540-4000)** at DCFS to make a child abuse report.
- The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the local child protective services agency will explore, study and evaluate the facts about your report. Then:
 - A Children's Social Worker will be sent to investigate the situation.
 - Attempt will be made to make the home a safe place for the child. If the perpetrator lives in the same home, a child is often placed in foster care or with relatives until the immediate danger has passed and support services can be provided to the family. Even after removal, every attempt is made to return the children as quickly as possible to their own family.
 - The number of children actually removed from their homes is relatively small - about 15% of those referred to DCFS. However, if the perpetrator does not live in the home, the child is likely to remain in the home.
 - DCFS will also make referrals for counseling for your child.
- Call the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health at 1-800-854-7771 and ask for their "Community Based Counseling" referrals or visit their website to find mental health service providers in your area of Los Angeles County at <http://dmh.lacounty.gov/>

(DeCarli, J. 2012)